

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING COMMITTEE-Town Meeting Report, Fall 2002

This is a brief report to summarize for Town Meeting the activities of the Comprehensive Planning Committee.

A Brief History

1997-1998

- Spring Town Meeting (1997) appropriated funding for Visioning Process
- Comprehensive Planning Committee formed and consultant hired
- Two public forums held (January and March 1998)
- Publication of *Amherst Visions* (June 1998)

1998-1999

- Scenario Planning Exercises / Development of Compelling Questions
- Public Forum (February 1999)
- Funding for the Comprehensive Plan proposal denied at Town Meeting

2000

- Developed concept for Build-out Analysis

2001

- Spring Town Meeting appropriates funding for Build-out Analysis
- Developed a request for proposals and hired consultant

2002

- Consultants gathered and analyzed data
- Published *Build-out Analysis and Future Growth Scenarios* report

Build-out Analysis

At its most fundamental, a build-out analysis sets out to determine how much land in a town is available for development, what type of development is permitted on that land, and how much development could ultimately result. The Town of Amherst recently made a significant investment in a highly accurate Geographic Information System (GIS) that provided the detailed digital basemap information that was used as the basis for this Build-out Analysis.

The GIS component of the Amherst Build-Out Study was undertaken in two major phases:

- Creation of the accurate baseline model, in which land already developed or lands with development constraints (conservation lands, steep slopes, wetlands, etc.) were taken out of consideration. The remaining buildable land was then examined using current zoning regulations to determine how much development would be permitted on these remaining lands.
- Generation of future development alternatives based on different assumptions about growth trends, and calculation of impacts of these alternatives.

Build-out Findings

Land areas that could be developed were tabulated against Amherst's 19 different zoning districts, and the uses allowed in these districts, to arrive at totals for remaining residential and commercial development capacity. Some of the primary findings of this study are:

Buildable Land

- 4,000 acres of buildable land area remains in Amherst out of a total land area of 17,000 acres.
- Of that, 2,000 acres are not subject to development constraints (steep slopes, wetlands, etc.).
- 12% of existing land in Amherst could be developed.

Housing

- As many as 3,600 new dwelling units could be built on this land under current zoning, in addition to the 9,400 existing units.
- This is a potential 38% increase in the number of dwelling units.

Population

- The current population of 35,000 (approx. 12,000 in group quarters) residents could increase by 8,000 residents.
- This is a 23% increase.
- This increase could include 1,000 school age children in addition to the current school age population of 4,100 students.

Water Use

- Residential water use at full build-out could increase by 600,000 gallons per day.
- The Town currently use 3,600,000 gallons per day.
- This is an increase of 16%.

Roads

- The potential development could result in an additional 30 miles of roads.
- The Town currently has 125 miles of roads.

Alternative Scenarios

Historical development trends indicate that Amherst will reach a build-out of 86% of its remaining residential capacity within thirty years (much longer, if ever, for commercial capacity). With this window of opportunity in mind, the consultant team worked to craft future development alternatives that would illustrate the possible impact of proactive planning contrasted with the "business as usual" scenarios expected to result from little or no comprehensive planning. The various outcomes were presented and discussed extensively, culminating in a Public Forum held in Amherst on May 11, 2002.

This process made a number of important contributions to continuing planning efforts, including the following:

- The study clarifies the scale of growth that can reasonably be expected in Amherst if current policies and regulations are continued into the future. It reveals the potential for more residential growth than had been calculated in earlier studies (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Build-out Analysis, June 1999). It also reaffirms the earlier observation that the regulatory "envelope" for business development is much larger than the anticipated market demand will ever require.

- The study shows vividly that growth pattern alternatives, such as guiding growth to village centers, can still be achieved, but that doing so is rapidly becoming more difficult as uncommitted land capacity becomes developed. Avoiding sprawl will require strengthening policy, regulatory, and investment strategies in the near future.
- The Town's efforts to focus growth and protect open landscapes deserve strengthening, and that the projected "trends continued" level of growth is undesirably high, even if guided towards a better pattern.

The Legacy of Planning in Amherst

Amherst has an enviable legacy in guiding growth and protecting open spaces. For many years the Town has taken steps, including regulatory, capital expenditures, and land purchases, to maintain the special characteristic of the Town. These actions have resulted in Amherst being recognized across the state, regionally and even nationally, for being proactive and innovative. The following are just a few among the many topics where that is true:

- 10% affordable housing
- 27% protected open space and agricultural land
- A transportation system that integrates buses, bicycles and pedestrian facilities
- Dynamic downtown
- Sustainable agriculture
- Strong school system
- Involved and diverse community
- Network of recognizable village centers
- Innovative zoning mechanisms (phased growth, cluster subdivision, village center zoning, farmland protection zoning)

Whats Next?

The projections indicate that under current policies and regulations, including continued open space preservation efforts, the Town will reach build-out of 86% of its residential capacity in just thirty years. Much of that depletion of resources is likely to happen in the next ten years before increasing land shortage slows growth even further. There is a window of opportunity for the Town to give direction to that growth. Doing so, however, will require the Town to:

- Engage the full diversity of the community in the necessary planning
- Plan comprehensively, not piecemeal
- Give importance to a long-term perspective
- Make planning and implementation inseparable parts of an integrated process

Doing all this requires commitment, but Amherst's record suggests that it can be done *here and now* in a way that again sets a standard for other communities.

The full report is available at <http://www.appgeo.com/clients/amherst/> or at the Planning Department.

The Comprehensive Planning Committee invites you to a public forum on development in Amherst on Tuesday, November 19, 2002 in the Town Room, Town Hall.